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REPORT ON
THE MOLDOVAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

December 8, 1991

Kishinev, Komrat and surrounding regions

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SUMMARY

- The December 8, 1991, Presidential election in Moldova was an overwhelming victory for the only candidate, Mircea Snegur, who held the post of President by virtue of previous election by the Moldovan Parliament.

- Snegur enjoys immense popularity, in particular, among ethnic Moldovans (Romanians) but also appears to have widespread, if more cautious, support of other ethnic minorities in Moldova -- with the exception of the Slavic residents on the left bank of the Dniestr River.

- As has generally been the pattern, election day went smoothly in areas under control by the Moldovan government.

- However, at least one prospective Moldovan candidate, Georgi Malarchuk, a respected writer and leader in the ecology movement, claimed to have been forced out of the race when local officials would not accept and stamp his petitions, and his campaign workers were threatened.

- The appeal by the major advocate of reunification with Romania, the Popular Front, for a boycott of the election was unsuccessful.

- In the largely Slavic "Transdniestr Republic" (TDR), which had previously declared its independence, voting was sporadic. Some voting took place in Moldovan-ethnic areas, but TDR officials in some heavily Slavic areas refused to set up polling places.

- In another breakaway "Republic", Gagauzia, officials did not permit any polling places to operate, and residents of Komrat who did want to vote had to hike out of town about 10 miles to vote.

BACKGROUND

Moldova, the former Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic of the USSR, is located primarily between the Prut and Dniestr Rivers, between present-day Romania and Ukraine. A smaller sliver of the former Moldavian SSR extends beyond the Dniestr River into present-day Ukraine. With the exception of this "Left Bank" area, the region basically comprises the area known historically as Bessarabia. The population is 65 percent ethnic Romanian, with significant Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish, and ethnic Turkic Gagauz populations. The area has been claimed and controlled by both Romania and Russia. It was part of Romania between World War I and World War II. Under the secret protocols of the 1939 *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*, Hitler basically ceded the area to Stalin, and the Red Army marched in a year later. Parts of northern and southern Moldova (Northern Bukovina and Southern Bessarabia) were turned over the Ukrainian SSR by Stalin, and these lands are still claimed by Romania. Post-war Soviet occupation was accompanied by the usual deportations, repressions, and inmigration of Slavic populations, along the Baltic occupation model.

Romanian dictator Nicholai Ceaucescu never publicly recognized Soviet hegemony in Moldova and Soviet authorities kept a tight lid on dissidence, which was almost exclusively associated with demands for reunification (and a small unregistered Baptist congregation located in Kishinev).

The Moldovan parliament declared Moldova's sovereignty on June 23, 1991, the government having refused to hold the "Union Referendum" of May 17, 1991. On August 27, 1991, following the unsuccessful *putsch* attempt in Moscow, the Moldovan parliament declared independence (282 votes in favor out of 366).

The position of the United States government on Moldavia vis-a-vis the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was expressed by former U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock in Kishinev in May 1990: The U.S. does not consider the Moldavian situation analogous to the Baltic States since Romania and the Soviet Union "agreed amongst themselves" in 1940 to the transfer of Bessarabia. Pro-reunification Moldovans and Romanians claim that no such "agreement" exists; the Romanian government simply acquiesced to a greater force.

At the moment, both the Romanian and Moldovan government publicly reject unification, although major political and cultural figures on both sides of the Prut River are working for reunification. Among the population of Moldovan as a whole, the issue does not seem to enjoy significant support.

Moldova is faced with two secessionist movements. The "Left Bank" area mentioned above has formed a "Transdniestr Republic" (TDR) with its capital in Tiraspol,

allegedly to protect its majority Russian and Ukrainian citizens (although ethnic Moldovans comprise 40 percent of the population) from alleged discrimination by Kishinev and the possibility of re-unification with Romania. Much of what passes for industrial output in Moldova is located in Trandniestria and Moldova's electricity comes from Dniestr River power plants controlled by directors sympathetic to the TDR. Theoretically, the TDR could shut down the power grid in Moldova, but in doing so would cut off the flow of hard currency-earning electricity to Romania and Bulgaria.

In Southern Moldova, the Turkic-speaking Gagauz minority (approximately 140,000 in the Moldova) has declared its own "Gagauz Republic" and claims to wish to remain, like the Transdniestr Republic, in the Soviet Union.

Both the TDR and Gagauz have armed militias, and there is little doubt that the weaponry is being provided by the sympathetic leadership of the Odessa Military District. The commander of the 14th Army, headquartered in Tiraspol, Lt. Gen. Gennadi Yakovlev, has accepted appointment as chief of defense and security for the TDR. On December 13, at least four Moldovan policemen and three members of the TDR militia were killed in a firefight near Dubassary.

The TDR and Gagauz Republic elected their own "Presidents" - Igor Smirnov and Stepan Topol, respectively - on December 1, 1991.

At the December 21, 1991 Alma-Ata Conference, Snegur pledged Moldovan membership in the Yeltsin-initiated Commonwealth of Independent States.

THE CANDIDATE

There was only one candidate for President, although at least two others had declared their candidacy (see below). Mircea Snegur, elected President of Moldova by the Parliament on July 29, 1991, is a former Communist Party Secretary for Agriculture, who left the Party in 1989.

Snegur comes from a peasant background and had been trained as an agronomist before becoming involved in Communist Party work.

THE ELECTION LAW

According to the election law enacted on September 18, 1991, the President of Moldova is elected for a five year term, with a maximum of two consecutive terms. A candidate must be between the ages of 35 and 60, and have lived in the Republic for the last ten years. Some critics of the government asserted that these restrictions were

designed to prevent some of Snegur's most likely opponents from running, although two of the most prominent possible candidates that fit into this category had declined to enter the lists against Snegur before the law was enacted.

Potential candidates were required to file petitions containing signatures of 25,000 enrolled voters. The candidates were to be nominated by registered political parties or "social-political groups." The nomination process began 60 days before and ended 30 days after the election. Each candidate was allowed to appoint 50 "trusted representatives" to aid in the campaign and represent him/her before government agencies and public groups.

As has been traditionally the case in the former Soviet Union, conduct of the election was entrusted to a three-tiered -- central, territorial, and local -- system of "election commissions". The Central Election Commission, appointed by the Parliament, is essentially responsible for carrying out the election law and providing funds necessary to conducting the elections. Formal registration of candidates, i.e., placing them on the ballot, is carried out by the Central Election Commission. The Central Election Commission announces the final results and is the final arbiter of legal challenges that may arise, except in cases where the Central Election Commission itself refuses to register a candidate, a decision that can be appealed to the Moldovan Supreme Court.

Other than assuring that the Election Law is observed on the territorial level, the primary responsiblity of the territorial commissions is to provide the local commissions with the necessary paperwork and ballots.

Local election commissions are essentially the precinct officials that record voters at the polling places, hand out ballots, observe order, and count the ballots at the end of the voting day.

THE ISSUES

The election was primarily a referendum on the leadership of President Snegur, who has charted a firm, pragmatic course of independence from Moscow, while keeping his options open, however, for economic cooperation and membership in the "Commonwealth of Independent States." He had consistently rejected Gorbachev's entreaties to join the Union Treaty.

The main issues facing Snegur and the people of Moldova are managing a successful, yet peaceful break from the Soviet Union, resurrecting the economy, maintaining civil peace and ensuring the territorial integrity of the Republic. The candidate's campaign slogan was "independence, civil peace, and prosperity for the people". According to a veteran observer of the Moldovan political scene, the term "independence" not only applied to the former Soviet Union, but was also understood to mean independence from

Romania.

Snegur's main "opponent" was the pro-reunification Moldovan Popular Front, which, in addition to calling for an election boycott -- also supported by a number of smaller allied groups -- ran a strenuous anti-Snegur campaign on the pages of its newspaper, *Tsara*. The Front accused Snegur of attempting to establish a "neo-Communist type of dictatorship" through merging the Parliament and reactionary forces, manipulating public opinion to repress pro-unification sentiment, and duplicitous dealings designed to keep Moldova in Moscow's sphere of influence. Front representatives claimed that Snegur's supporters would not hesitate to use illegal means to assure that the voter turnout passed 50 percent, if necessary.

The election took place against the backdrop of the "stolen territories" issue, i.e. the former areas of Romania -- chiefly Northern Bukovina and Southern Bessarabia -- presently within the territory of Ukraine as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The government of Romania has declared a legal claim to these territories.

Snegur played down the "stolen territories" issue; his administration prefers to press for an understanding with Kiev on meeting the cultural needs of ethnic Romanians and Ukrainians in each other's territories.

THE CAMPAIGN

Snegur campaigned actively, visiting factories, meetings, villages, etc. His posters were displayed prominently throughout Kishinev, and huge banners touting his campaign slogan were draped over many city streets. Endorsements of Snegur by various public leaders (religious, non-ethnic Romanian, etc) were prominent on the state-run television and in the government press.

The main question as to Snegur's election was whether 51 percent of the electorate would turn out to make the election valid in accordance with the Election Law. As it turned out, they did, in overwhelming numbers.

ELECTION DAY OBSERVATIONS

A Helsinki Commission observer visited a number of polling places beginning in Kishinev and along the road south to Komrat, the center of Gagauzia. Since Gagauz authorities had prevented the setting up of polling places in Komrat, the observer visited the village of Borogan, about 15 kilometers distant from the city, where Komrat residents were permitted to register and vote. By mid-afternoon, ninety-six voters travelled out to cast their ballots.

The Commission observer went west to the town of Leovo on the Prut River and then back northeast in the direction of Kishinev. On the return route, the observer visited a polling place in the Bulgarian-ethnic village of Kolibabovka, and observed the final vote count in the city of Khimchesht (1,495 for Snegur, 12 against, including one write-in for Popular Front associate Mircea Druk and one for radical Russian Unionist Vladimir Zhirinovsky).

As has generally been the pattern, election day went smoothly in areas under control by the Moldovan government. Much less frequent than in other areas of the former Soviet Union were such discrepancies as multiple voting in a booth or persons voting for other members of the family. The Commission observer saw little of the former practice and none of the latter, and voting officials expressed surprise that an observer would inquire as to the possibility of, say, a husband voting for his wife. There were, however, substantial lists for the "absentee box" that is carried to residences and hospitals for the indisposed, a practice with offers the possibility for chicanery. At least one official stated that people had called from the local hospital to make sure that they were not missed.

THE MALARCHUK NON-CANDIDACY

Besides President Snegur, two other individuals, writer and environmental activist Georgi (Romanian: Gheorghe) Malarchuk and former Communist Party chairman Grigore Eremei, had declared their intention to file candidacies.

Both Malarchuk and Eremei formally withdrew their candidacies before filing their petitions. While Eremei's reasons were not entirely clear (the Helsinki Commission representative was unable to meet with him) informed opinion held that he had reconsidered his ability to collect the necessary 25,000 signatures. Malarchuk contended that when his supporters attempted to collect signatures, many were threatened with reprisals such as loss of jobs by employers and refusal to register their petitions, as required by the election law, for forwarding to the Central Election Commisison. His appeals to the Central Election Commission went unheeded, contended Malarchuk. Interestingly, Malarchuk did not blame President Snegur personally, but rather his *apparat*.

THE RESULTS

The results of the election were somewhat skewed by the fact that, according to the Central Electoral Committee, over half a million eligible voters out of approximately 2.9 million were unable to vote due to interference by authorities in the Transdniestr Republic -- only 43 polling places out of a planned 300 had been opened as of November 28 -- and

in Gagauzia, where there were none. Of the 2.35 registered voters remaining, the turnout was 83 percent, 98 percent of whom voted for Snegur. A poll by the Moldovan National Sociological Institute had given a Snegur a 62 percent favorable rating.

As predicted by observers prior to the election, Snegur's peasant background served him well in the rural areas, where he rolled up huge totals. His lowest tally was in Kishinev, where he received only 64 percent of the vote, reflecting the influence of the Popular Front and significant pro-reunification sentiment among intellectuals and cultural figures in the capital.

CONCLUSIONS

Mircea Snegur's overwhelming victory indicates that for the time being, at least, the vast majority of Moldovans support his pragmatic policies toward independence, domestic secessionists, and economic relations with other former Soviet republics. If there was significant displeasure with Snegur's handling of the Transdniestrian and Gagauz crises, or his unwillingness to become publicly embroiled with Ukraine over the "stolen territories", it was not reflected in the results.

The Popular Front seems to have suffered a major blow. Clearly, the electorate did not heed its call for a boycott, and the 2 percent rejection figure would indicate that even the perhaps 20 percent of the population who disagree with Snegur's position on reunification (Snegur himself is quoted as saying that 80 percent of Moldovans are opposed to reunification) did not feel strongly enough on the issue to cross his name off the ballot.

The formal demise of the Soviet Union with the establishment of the Commonwealth of Sovereign States presents President Snegur with major opportunities and challenges. Snegur is undoubtedly relying on renewed economic cooperation to restore the frayed supply line of vital raw material and energy supplies that Moldovan needs. Additionally, by allying himself with the Commonwealth, Snegur certainly hopes that Russian President Boris Yeltsin will rein in the Transdniestrian Republic and pressure it to return to the Moldovan fold. Under Article 5 of the Commonwealth Treaty, Russia is obliged to recognize the territorial integrity of Moldova. Theoretically, Yeltsin should order the Army to withdraw its support of the secession movement, allowing Kishinev a better chance to reassert its authority. On the other hand, Yeltsin may be under pressure by Slavic nationalists not to "abandon the Russians to the Romanians". The first scenario presents Yeltsin with a test of his authority, the second, a test of his character.

Snegur's continued popularity, if not his political future, appears to hinge on the fate of the Commonwealth. If the economy improves and the secession issues are resolved, he

will be a hero. If, however, the Commonwealth lets him down, we may be sure that the next Moldovan Presidential election, assuming there is one, will not be a one-man race.